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Rice's Crossing Preserve: 'epic' acquisition, Nevada, Yuba officials say



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Dave Sutton, Northern California Director of Trust for Public Land, toasts a job well done.



Dignitaries with photos of the Yuba River near Rice's Crossing stand over looking the Yuba River Canyon.



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Shaun Clarke, trail coordinator for Bear Yuba Land Trust, pulls a bag off the sign during the dedication of the Yuba Rim Trail.

Know & go

Who: Yuba Rim Trail

What: Public opening of new 2.5 mile trail at north end of Rice's Crossing Preserve

Where: Marysville Road, about 2 miles past New Bullard's Bar Dam

When: Earth Day, April 18

More info. Bear Yuba Land Trust, 530-272-5994, or www.bylt.org.

A new 2,700-acre recreation area that promises hiking, bicycling and horseback riding trails as well as new Yuba River fishing, kayaking and swimming spots was dedicated Friday amid much celebration.

"This is the largest parcel we've ever acquired and the largest area of public lands," said Marty Coleman-Hunt, executive director of Bear Yuba Land Trust, of the new Rice's Crossing Preserve in the middle Sierra foothills of Yuba and Nevada counties. "It connects public lands, one end to the other."

Coleman-Hunt, one of about 60 people at Friday's ceremonies, said the "connector" property is the middle piece linking the federal Plumas and Tahoe National Forests to the north with the South Yuba River State Park at Bridgeport to the south.

"This is really the linchpin that ties it all together — 6 1/2 miles of Yuba River under one ownership," said David Sutton, land conservation director in California for the Trust for Public Land, which brokered the acquisition that closed last June and which was more than 10 years in the making. "The odds against success for something like this are very high — it's only through the passion of the people involved that this was able to happen."

Bear Yuba Land Trust, which acquired the property for \$3.25 million with contributions from Sierra Nevada Conservancy, The California Natural Resources Agency and CalTrans, has divided the massive and rugged preserve into three sections:

— North Meadows, where Friday's ceremonies were held, off Marysville Road about two miles past the New Bullard's Bar Dam in Yuba County. This section will be the main trailhead for a network of multi-use trails that Bear Yuba Land Trust will be developing. A 2.5-mile section of the first of those, the Yuba Rim Trail, will be opened to the public on Earth Day, April 18. See www.bylt.org for more information.

— Yuba River canyon, a steep, rocky and pristine gorge with limited access in the middle of the preserve, will be left mostly as wildlife habitat. Coleman-Hunt said the land trust will work with South Yuba River Conservation League to look at habitat preservation while also designating fuels reduction and forest management plans.

— South Yuba River/Bridgeport in Nevada County. This includes the original Rice's Crossing that the preserve took for its name because of its historical significance (there is no longer a bridge crossing, but the original abutments are still there). Coleman-Hunt said the land trust plans to develop this area as a new Yuba River access destination and trail site to help take some of the overflow from the popular South Yuba River recreation spots along Highway 49.

"This is epic," said Izzy Martin, CEO of The Sierra Fund, which contributed the initial \$20,000 in 2005 to launch preliminary explorations and helped to obtain the \$1 million Sierra Nevada Conservancy grant. She said there were "very few protected properties in this particular elevation," referring to the high to medium Sierra pines and blue oak woodlands.

"What a gift — it shows the strength of the Bear Yuba Land Trust to work through all the obstacles," Martin said. "It was 10 years in the making, but this will be ours for the people for hundreds of years."

Nevada County Supervisor Hank Weston, one of about a half-dozen speakers at Friday's ceremonies, said Rice's Crossing Preserve was "one of the most important acquisitions that has taken place" in the region because it will offer tourism benefits to the economy, allow for new recreational opportunities for residents and also offer public agency access for watershed protection and fuels reduction programs. About one-third of the preserve is in Nevada County and the rest is in Yuba County.

"It's phenomenal that they could pull this off," Weston said. "It will always be in trust for the people, like a bank."

Weston said the preserve was "unbelievable" in its beauty and would be "another gem for Nevada County."

“They’ve got a lot of work to do (on the trails),” Weston said. “But the key is they got the land — everything from there on is a go.”

For more information on the April 18 Yuba Rim Trail opening or to volunteer with Bear Yuba Land Trust, call 530-272-5994, or visit www.bylt.org.

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